

‘Building Bridges’

Focus:

Transitioning 5 year olds to Tuakau Primary School - Our Reality

A research investigation undertaken as part of Principal’s Sabbatical leave.

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'BUILDING BRIDGES'

Introduction

This project began through my interest in the transition of the very young new entrants to school. There is a lot of research around this issue but, as the ERO publication of May 2015 mentions, it generally focuses on what happens at school.

I wondered about the reality of transition for **our** parents, children, early childhood centres and our teachers, and if there were ways we could enhance the experience for all concerned at our school.

Hence my questions:

What is transition and what does research say about successful transition?

Do all stakeholders in our transition process have similar views on what is valued or important?

Is our transition process working for the benefit of all, particularly the child?

What is our parents' reality?

How do teachers at Early Childhood centres and at school feel about our transition process?

What barriers, if any, are in place for any of the stakeholders?

Do our expectations and assumptions align with other stakeholders?

The project findings are informed through reading of research and articles concerning the transition process.

The findings are also based on conversations or visits with the following

- Te Kohanga Reo o Te Awamarahi, Tuakau-Port Waikato Road
- Tuakau Kindergarten
- Little Stars Kindergarten, Tuakau
- A1 Day Care, Tuakau
- Tuakau Learning Centre
- Little Steps, Tuakau
- Carol Hartley, Mangere Bridge Kindergarten
- Clare Williams, RTLB co-Practice Manager, Cluster 13
- Kowhai Group - Huntly - engaging Priority Families Initiative
- Public Health Nurse
- Parents and grandparents of children at Tuakau Primary School
- New Entrant staff at Tuakau Primary School

I am very grateful to these people for being willing to openly and honestly share their ideas and thoughts about our transition process. I know that some of these will be very helpful in our review of what happens now and what could happen in the future to improve or add to how we welcome our tamariki into Tuakau Primary School.

Ngā mihi nui ki ā koutou.

Leadership responsibility

Prior to the transition research I read the Ministry of Education publication *Tū Rangatira: Māori Medium Educational Leadership* and was struck by the enormity of the responsibility we have toward all people in our schools.

The philosophy behind *Tū Rangatira* resonated with me in relation to our responsibility toward tamariki but in particular the ones who transition to school for the first time. It states : ...a key role of leadership is that of being a **kaitiaki or guardian**.

The kaitiaki leadership role in education is mentioned as a guardian, caregiver and protector, one whereby we have responsibility for the care and protection of the health, safety and wellbeing of learners and staff, especially our new children and their whānau.

Ahakoā he iti he pounamu

Although little they are treasures (in relation to our New entrants)

So...

What is Transition?

Fabian and Dunlop (2002) in *Crossing the Border: A community negotiates the transition from early childhood to primary school* describe transition as...a holistic, dynamic experience that takes place over an extended period:

The word transition is referred to as the process of change that is experienced when children (and their families) move from one setting to another...It includes the length of time it takes to make such a change, spanning the time between any pre-entry visit(s) and settling-in, to when the child is more fully established as a member of the new setting.

Kathy Walker in *Transition to School* (Education Horizons Journal, Volume 5 No.2 Autumn 1999) describes transition as ...moving from one situation, programme or centre to another...a process involving change which may involve location, expectations, responsibilities, personnel etc....

Transition is a time when an individual changes his or her role in a community. Hartley, Rogers, Smith and Lovatt (2014)

Transition is a process that begins from the moment parents think about sending children to an Early Childhood Centre and continues throughout the various changes in setting that are made during a child's learning pathway. (ERO publication May 2015 *Continuity of learning transitions from early childhood services to school*)

Research Tells Us

- While the number of Māori children participating in quality early learning is increasing, Māori children still have lower rates of participation compared to the national participation rate. (Ka Hikitia - Accelerating Success-2013-2017 -summary)
- Data gathered by the PIPS school entry assessment provided by the Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring at Canterbury University shows that the social and emotional maturity of the child -at transition into school - is as important as their cognitive ability to count and recognise letters and shapes as a predictor of future achievement.
- Large sample Danish and American studies found that delaying a child's first day of school for a year could have mental health benefits, including reducing the chances of hyperactivity and inattention.
- The knowledge, skills, values and attitudes acquired during the early life-stages, provide the foundation for a lifelong learning habit. Schools are pivotal organisations for laying such foundations. (OECD Innovative Learning Environments project - *The Nature of Learning: Using Research to Inspire Practice*).
- Building connections between the home and school is vital in learner success. Families need to be proactively involved in their children's learning.
- Children transitioning into school are often faced with formal teaching and learning methodologies that contrast markedly with those followed in some contemporary settings. (Carr, Smith, Duncan, Jones, Lee, & Marshall, 2010; Peters, 2010 in Core Education publication - *New-entrant classrooms in the re-making; Keryn Davis (2015)*)
- There is a need to shift teaching and learning into the knowledge and 'knowing' era with an emphasis on building on, and making connections to, children's prior learning and experiences from home and early childhood education.
- The social and emotional areas of development are the most important for a positive start to school.
- The process takes different lengths of time for children to feel they belong and to settle into learning. "Relationships, for all concerned in the transition process, take time and perseverance to develop".Hartley, Rogers, Smith and Lovatt (2014)
- Many children are not ready for formal instruction on arrival at school.
- Good communication, collaborative relationships between all concerned with the child and knowledge about the child are crucial to successful transition.
- When parents and children feel valued and understand what is happening, they will better engage with learning and activities at school.
- 'Transition from early childhood education to primary school is critical and, when managed well, can set students on a positive learning pathway'.
- Students from low-income households are more likely to struggle with engagement in learning even though many value education and hard work. Seven reasons for this are: health and nutrition, vocabulary, effort, hope and growth mind-set, cognition, relationships and distress levels. Before dealing with these, the suggestion is to get to know your students well. Without respect, and without taking time to connect with your students, these 7 factors and attempts to lessen their negative impact will mean little.

(Educational Leadership publication May 2013, Vol.70, No. 8 - *Faces of Poverty*)

Added Implications and Challenges of Transition

In discussing transition, Sally Peters in *Transitions from early childhood education to primary school: An interview with Sally Peters (2015)*, she reminds us that...teachers - from early childhood centres and schools - also make transitions.

In the *NZCER PRESS No. 2, 2015 SET publication*, Sally Peters noted that "...research from a range of countries...focusing on Pedagogies of Educational Transitions (POET)...found that there were "some similarities in the experience of transitions, despite the differences in the educational systems that were represented". She goes on to say that a "number of key messages emerged, but, the most powerful ones were around addressing inequities and the importance of communication".

Sally Peters in her 2015 interview on transition stated: As Mitchell (2014) notes, "The views of 'priority families' offered insights into inequities that can begin long before children get to a school". {These views} ...carry important messages for schools...in terms of how to foster a sense of welcome and belonging for families. The findings showed that simple things such as friendly greetings, the way teachers interact with children, and ongoing reciprocal sharing of information, can go a long way in developing trust and supporting engagement".

However, Peters (2004) warns that; "No matter how much we may feel we have an 'open door', not everyone will experience it as such. For some families an extra welcome (that is culturally appropriate) and encouragement, might make all the difference".

As teachers, in all centres or schools, we each have our own backgrounds, values and experiences from which we draw assumptions that impact on the way we interact with others. Arndt (2014) suggests that, "Thinking about interactions with colleagues and the experiences of the... staff... can open up possibilities for assumptions and expectations to be unpacked so practices that marginalise certain groups or individuals are avoided".

Hill, Comber, Loudon and Rivalland (1998) in Hartley, Rogers, Smith. Peters and Carr (2012) " "argued that learning the culture of the school, and their role within it (i.e., what it means to 'do school'), was a necessary step before children could focus on the *content* of schooling".

Kathryn Peckham (2017) believes that: "This period of transition cannot be viewed in isolation, represented by a day on the calendar, but rather as a continuum, aided by the actions of parents and both familiar and new adults. Through careful planning and preparation, links between familiar environments, routines and expectations, the unknowns to come can be identified and utilised, easing a child's transition and ultimate developmental outcomes".

In an interview with Jack Tame on *Breakfast TVNZ TV1, 30 March*, education researcher, Keryn Davis states: ' Children need to learn in an active way... The classroom needs to be designed to meet children's needs developmentally and be more in line with what children need now and in the future...Early Childhood centres and schools should offer a different and diverse range of experiences for children...The balance of power needs to shift towards the children's ideas and motivations, thinking and creative inquiries...The challenge for teachers is...'how can we respond more appropriately to children starting school..Giving

agency to children may make teachers feel redundant at times but at other times, they provide important scaffolds for children to be successful in what they are doing whether it is the activity or playing and working collaboratively with others.

Our Transition Reality as shared by our school community

1. Early Childhood Centres - Kindergartens - Kohanga Reo teachers / kaiako

Without exception, all teachers I spoke with believed **developing relationships** and **making connections** were crucial to successful transition of children to school. Four out of the 5 centres also saw cultural connectedness as a further key to successful transition. If the relationships and connections between parents, centres and the school were strong then communication would be improved, expectations shared and information to help us know the learner better would also be shared.

Successes

- All were in favour of the Week 1 and Week 5 transition of new children with one stating they would not mind a once-a-term intake. They liked the idea of children having a friend from the start and how this helped **build confidence**.
- The **powhiri** to welcome children was supported and four centres asked to be invited so they could have the opportunity to 'hand over' their children as part of transition to school.
- Our New Entrant teachers were mentioned as being **respectful** of children and parents.
- The Team Leader of the Junior area 'takes all advice as a "heads-up" and not negativity. She does not reject the information.
- All centres commented about how the **communication** between them and our school was well established and that any contact they made was received professionally and we listened to any advice. One teacher stated; "I feel free to say something if I need to."
Another commented; 'Communication's very important between child/teacher/school and parents - you guys are pretty good at this!'
- **Pre-visits** are working well and are excellent for children to **make connections** and the teacher to get to know the child. The school is open to children having extra visits if needed or requested.
- Outside agencies are **welcomed** to help transition children with special needs
- Three of the centres liked the collaborative meetings started by the Deputy Principal and would like to see this continue. It was a chance to share expectations, challenges and a way to visit each centre.

Challenges

- There is not enough knowledge across all sectors of what each one does. Comment - 'We don't know if they have time to have 'exploring time at school'.
- Parent aspirations and anxieties about transition to school and not knowing expectations before the child makes the transition to school.
- Some children do not come for a pre-visit and are more unsettled when they start. Some only go to an early childhood centre for a short period of time.
- Two centres mentioned not knowing anything about the Tuakau Kāhui Ako/Community of Learning and how they would like to have a voice in the group. The other centres did not mention it at all.

- Parental pressure to start school because of the cost of childcare from age 5, even though the child may not be socially or emotionally ready.
- Finding out the expectations of different cultures - How do we ensure these parents get the correct messages/information about transition? Who are the key people in the community?
- Cost of transition to parents - uniform, stationery, providing lunches etc.

Suggestions

- Professional development so that early childhood centres and primary teachers know the links between *Te Whāriki* and the *New Zealand Curriculum*.
- Sector sharing of expectations so we can develop common transition goals and parents know what to expect when child transitions into school.
- All centres said they would welcome visits from the school's New Entrant teachers before the children transition to school. Two suggested that the teachers could talk with the parents at the centre and answer any questions. One commented - 'The more information the better - paper just gets filed - could talk to next year's parents as well. I share with families but they need to hear it from the teachers.'
- Make better use of portfolios to share knowledge about the child and possibly carry it on in some way when the child transitions to school.
- Keep strengthening relationships between centres and school so parents see this happening and children enjoy the interactions. Informal visits from teachers builds confidence. Comment - 'It's scary for kids going to school. They are busy thinking about self-preservation - getting to know the teacher is not a priority.'
- Centre managers need to visit schools more often to get up-to-date information.
- Centres and school need to have network meetings to decide what learning stories could be done and what Key Competencies and dispositions could be focused on.
- Have an orientation day for parents, children and teachers so they can get to know one another before starting school.
- Find ways of creating meaningful connectedness.

Parents/grandparents/whānau

As for the early childhood centres, the quality of **relationships** was important to this group but they all highlighted the **sharing of information** and **support** as pivotal to their child's successful transition to school.

Successes

- Many comments were made that highlighted the **importance of the adults** that the child will meet on transition, particularly the teacher. e.g. *A. and K. are a good team. They have good personalities with kids. They are patient and have a good tone of voice. K. offered to meet my child at home which was amazing, She did meet him at his kindy and saw him where he was comfortable. The biggest influence in his successful transition was the teacher because he has to have that trust in someone. K. built that trust very quickly and A. is just lovely. K. was magic with my child. She has the teaching style for little ones who are nervous or shy - teaches from the floor often. H. knows our children and our ways. She knows how to make our children and us feel comfortable and welcome. C. works well with her and helps our little ones.*

The kindness and warmth of all the teachers was important and mentioned.

- Parents mentioned that they felt **welcome** at the school from the moment they came to talk about enrolment. *T. was lovely when I met her. K. in the office and M. made us feel so welcome. We felt really happy and decided to come to Tuakau Primary.*
- **Special education support** was highlighted. *They helped us with transition which helped our anxiety levels....G.M. gave grandma tools to help with the child's speech. We had lots of support from A.C.the Early Intervention Teacher. This continued after transition and that was great because i didn't think I had the help. It made a big difference.*
- All but one liked the idea of children starting in a group. .
- Several children already had older siblings or cousins at the school which made transition easier.
- All liked the special 'welcoming' assembly / powhiri.
- Parents liked the way children were looked after when they came for the first time and said it was reassuring that they had a buddy.
- All parents thought the pre-visits were valuable

There were many other things that parents liked about the school that were not directly related to transition but which made them feel comfortable. E.g. the school pool and swimming programme, the bulk texting of important information, the whole feeling of the school.

Challenges

- One parent preferred individual entry to school because there may be more than one child struggling to settle in and it *...might make it hard for teachers to stretch their love and attention.*
- Parents suffer from anxiety separation and have a number of 'need-to-knows. e.g. where the toilets are, what's expected on entry - signing in, powhiri, etc., how will child cope in the playground, would he play with others, would he know what to do when the bell rings, will the teacher want to 'deal with' my child if he is difficult.
- Grandparents raising children were concerned about the effects of previous family events.
- Loss of WINZ subsidy when a child turns 5 is significant.
- Cost of uniform, stationery etc.
- With children at different levels socially and academically, is that hard for the teachers?

Suggestions

- Most parents felt it would be helpful to get the parents and children together before transition so they know one another, even if they have been to kindy. They need also to meet the teachers and Principal beforehand.
- Need lots of information on what to do or bring for the first day of school. Eg. powhiri, bringing togs etc. This could be advertised on the school website
- Let parents what is available to help before children transition to school. This could help with costs - e.g. warriors' clothing, KidsCan food, Breakfast Club etc.

New Entrant Primary Teachers

Successes

- School powhiri for new children
- Parents comfortable to come into the classrooms
- Good relationships and connections we have and are building with families and children
- Both teachers think that the small group intakes are better than the individual ones

Challenges

- Increasing number of children coming in with poor fine and gross motor skills
- Increasing number of children coming in without the skills they are assumed to have - e.g. low level of oral language - children cannot form correct simple sentences
- Changing world for children - more living with grandparents or other family members for various reasons.
- Destabilisation of children causing distress
- Being really conscious of parents worrying that their child is already 'below' standard when they are only 5. *It is hard to balance where my priorities should be.*
- Trying to find time and a balance between the needs of the children who have just made the transition to school and those who are ready for learning and can access the curriculum.
- Five weeks is not long enough for a new group of children transitioning into school - they tend to revert back to being new again when the new children arrive,

Suggestions

- Both believe that one intake a term would be better in terms of time to settle children in and to find out their strengths, interests and abilities.
- Teachers agreed that pre-visits to kōhanga and early childhood centres would enable us to see the child in that setting and talk to their teachers.
- Local Kōhanga and early childhood centres could be invited more often to school, especially when we have something of interest taking place.
- Review the first reports that go home and consult with parents about what they would like to see in the report.

All stakeholders made other suggestions for 'tweaking' what is already happening at the school and we will be taking these into consideration with parents, early childhood centres and parents where and when appropriate..

Many of the articles and publications read contain extra suggestions for improving communication, relationships and ultimately the transition experience for parents, teachers in all sectors and especially the child.

In particular, I refer to *Crossing the Border*, the publication written in a joint research venture by staff from Mangere Bridge kindergarten and University of Waikato personnel. Their further article on *Transition portfolios* explores the value of portfolios made at early childhood and how they may be better utilised during the transition process.

Keryn Davis' project on re-making New Entrant classrooms explores the re-designing of schooling to 'take a more identity-focused and future-focused approach to teaching and learning and challenges schools to build on, and make connections to children's' prior learning and experiences from home and ECE.' (Ministry of Education, 2007) It documents the development of the three New Entrant classes at Mairehau Primary School, Christchurch.

What Next?

If we are going to transform practice in our area so that a child's learning journey is seamless and a positive experience for all, we need to;

1. Share some of the stories from other areas with teachers. A further example is *Seamless Transitions through play* - an article in Education Gazette 1 May, 2017. What can we learn from other initiatives?
2. Review our transition process using the ERO evaluation framework. What is happening? What are we doing? Is this good enough?
3. Take into account the suggestions from interviews. What do we need to do / prioritise and why?
4. What will make the biggest difference quickly?
5. How are we going to track the effectiveness of any changes made?

At each stage of our inquiry, we need to ensure we are including and collaborating with our whānau, the early childhood centres and staff at our school. We know that the transition practices at our school are generally positive and we will continue them while seeking to improve on the transition experience for all children.

He waka eke noa. We are all in this together.

My grateful and sincere thanks go to the Tuakau Primary School Board of Trustees and our Deputy Principal, Tina Taylor, for enabling and supporting me to take the time to research and find some answers to my questions about our transition process.

I am sure that the next stage of this review process will see us forge stronger links with and build bridges between all transition participants to the benefit of our youngest learners.

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